Recreate Us

By; Will Carter

You don't know the importance of accessibility and universal design until you have to.

As you might be able to tell, I am a disabled man.

When I was 17 years old in October of my senior year of high school, my 95 Honda Accord was in a head-on collision with a suburban. I suffered a brain injury, a stroke, a seizure, a collapsed lung, and a ruptured spleen. After removing part of my skull to relieve the swelling, I was put into a coma.

After three weeks, I awoke to a different world.

See, when someone's in a coma, the doctors encourage music that the person in the coma enjoys to help him or her wake up.

After three weeks, my eyes opened to the stirring sounds of Sufjan Stevens's "Chicago," whose lyrics are "All things go, to recreate us, all things grow."

I will return to this, but first, a detour.

Prior to my accident, I had the typical backstory of any academic, AP classes, honors society, president of the drama club, model un, debate team, and my school had just performed one of my plays the previous Spring. I was heading places.

Then, after twisted metal, broken and bloodied, I am in a wheelchair, diapers for a moment, and have the inability to remember what happened five minutes ago. By the grace of god, I am alive, but school went from an easy proof of my abilities to an arduous task I feared I could not accomplish.

I am blessed though. I make it through to graduation, fretting all the while.

Then, I go to college, and I have a professor who tells me she does not allow extra time on assignments, quizzes., or tests.

Knowing what I know now, I would have said, “Thank you so much. I will see you in court for violating the Americans with Disabilities Act,” but back then, I was scared, anxious, trying to get make it through the day without appearing too disabled, and I struggled, oh how I struggled.

Unfortunately for me, though, perseverance is both one my greatest strengths and one of my worst faults.

Soon, I gave up on everything else but school. I ate in my dorm room, lived on four hours of sleep and focused solely on keeping my scholarship. The Fall of 2008, my freshman year of college, was one of the darkest years of my life, as I drifted through, a lost boat, looking ravenously for land.

. In my freshman core class, basically my English 1101, I failed my first two papers and got C’s on my next 2, and a B on the last. I ended the semester with an A- in the course because of a curve that none of us could imagine was coming. I worked hard, got the result I wanted, but my mental health paid dearly for it.

Fast forward to graduate school, I am healed to a greater degree than before, but I am tired all the time, have no time for much of anything but school, and sleep? What sleep. My mental health is deteriorating, and when I go to the doctor about feeling lightheaded and drained all the time, even if I somehow manage to rest, I’m told that I’m okay and to simply stop taking Claritin D. Surprisingly, not the solution.

Then, I am called into meet with the head of the graduate program. She talks about my showing up late, struggling with time management and organization, and all I can tell her is that I’m trying. It might not look like it, but by God, I’m trying, and with almost tears in my eyes, I plead with her that I do not know how to try any harder.

Three and a half years later, I will learn that I have bradycardia, a condition where your heart beats half the rate it should.

See, I didn't look like I was trying as hard as I should, yet I was giving more effort than was healthy.

I tell you this to make one point: I know from personal experience that you might be giving it all you've got, but it looks like you're not trying at all.

This informs my teaching. I always tell students three things:

I always assume the best of intentions.

I always approach students with care and concern, not anger

I always let my know students know that if they're struggling, I understand.

This is because not all disabilities are visible. Sometimes, not all disabilities are known, even to the students. Furthermore, effort is not always connected to output. A disabled student might be giving 100%, but on the outside, it might look different.

Accessibility is opening learning to all, accommodations for physical and learning disabilities, access to resources, but it is also empathy. Because of my background and my struggle to receive the same compassion and understanding, I have sought to create a classroom, where every student can feel successful.

You need more time? Ask me. You are struggling with an assignment? Ask me. Did you fall off with the course, but you are ready to re-engage? Welcome back.

The best thing you can do for your disabled students is assume the best of intentions, approach with care rather than conflict, to offer empathy, no matter the student's apparent previous decisions.

The impact will be loud.

I always tell my students the story of my accident, brain injury, stroke, and coma, as well as my struggles my senior year. I tell them because I want them to know that I struggled, so if they find they are having difficulty, they will experience empathy, rather than judgement.

I know the power of this. I know the importance of this.

One student in 2020 told me of the power of my openness.

She is a brain injury survivor, and she sent me and email that rocked my world.

"Thank you, Professor Carter, for being open about your injury. You have helped me love myself more."

Heart. Full.

This student is one of the best students I have ever had.

Yes, she had accommodations, but those accommodations helped her reach her highest potential. She has her bachelor's now, and I can't wait to see what glorious things she does with her life.

If I can circle back to the song from the beginning, the one to which I woke up to out of my coma, "All things go, all things grow, to recreate us."

My injury, my disability, is not a flaw. It is part of my growth, my recreation into someone new. This someone understand the importance of accessibility, the importance of care and empathy, and knows the value these things to our students.

My disability is a strength and a gift

It has made me a better teacher, and I like to believe, a better person.